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opening extract from

# **Goodbye Mommy**

**Memoirs of a Survivor**

written by

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## Prologue

I could feel the cold slowly creep up the vein in my arm and when I could no longer feel its chill, I felt its poison weaken me; all the colour left my face, my temperature dropped and I began shivering uncontrollably. Suddenly weary, I shut my eyes while the toxins brought me to the edge of death.

'Oh God, I can't do this. I can't. Get me out of here. Please, I can't do it. I can't breathe. Make it stop,' I pleaded to Peter and no one in particular. Snot ran from my nose as I rocked and sobbed, rocked and sobbed.

My head was aching from the tight blue Cold Cap that was freezing my brain. Icicles formed on the protective gauze around my ears and forehead. I felt like I had a mouthful of ice that I couldn't spit out. The tightness of the cap, and the fact it was connected to a machine so I couldn't move about, made me claustrophobic. I clenched my fists as tightly as I could and scrunched my face, letting out a low growl of torment.

'It's not a choice, Lora Lee. You have to do this. You have to do this for our boys. For me. We need you. Come on darling, I'm here. Calm down. We'll do it together. Just breathe.' Peter stroked my leg.

He was right. I had to do this for my boys big and small. The prospect of not being there for my children consumed me with

dread. It hurt to think of them growing up without me, a hurt more painful than the treatment I was enduring. So I changed my chant from, 'I can't do this' to 'You can do this Lora Lee. You can do it. Just concentrate on each breath. Rock and breathe. You promised your sons you would do whatever it takes. Do it for them. You know you can.' Somehow I managed to get through that difficult first hour.

It had been only a week and a half since the shocking diagnosis. Everything had proceeded at dizzying speed, and although I was desperately tired, the steroids I had been given to help with the induced nausea kept me awake. In an attempt to escape my surroundings, I sat in my uncomfortable cold vinyl seat with my eyes shut. I should have been able to extend the footrest so I could recline, but the room was too small. I went over events trying to make sense of the crushing deluge of grief. The smell of rubbing alcohol made my glands water and my stomach queasy. It catapulted me back to my youth and the pain I had been too young to name before.

I thought about the last time I suffered through chemotherapy 23 years ago when I was 15. Maybe it wouldn't have been so bad if Mommy had been there to reassure and hold me. I had felt so lonely. Every cell in my being ached for the protection of her, but Mommy was only a figment of my imagination.

My real mommy had abandoned my two sisters and me when I was only seven. This made me think about my own four sons and the possibility of abandoning them due to my illness. Telling my twelve-year-old the bad news was possibly the hardest thing I've ever had to do. He had just returned from a summer holiday with his father and my heart was full of dread as I heard his car pull up.

I had read pamphlets and websites on the best way to broach the subject with young children, but when it is your own child all that

advice seems so weak and rehearsed. It was easier telling my three younger sons because they didn't really understand and didn't ask many questions, but my eldest has always been very sensitive, and I knew he would take it hard.

I recalled how I had thrown open our front door. 'Hi Darling. I missed you so much. How was your holiday?' I embraced him a little too eagerly and hugged him a little too hard. He didn't seem to notice; I was just being the overly doting mother he was used to.

'Yeah, it was good thank you. Dad made me walk everywhere. My legs are killing me.'

I flashed my eyes at his father James. I had already told him the news in a telephone conversation during their time away. James looked at me sadly. 'Here are PJ's things. His passport is in the bag. Alright son; hope you had a good time. See you in a couple of weeks.' James gave our son a hug, shot me another knowing glance, wished me well and left.

I shut the door slowly, reluctant to turn around and face PJ because tears were already welling in my eyes. I took a deep breath and tried to sigh away my sadness. We went into our living room and he sat in our large wingback chair while I kneeled on the floor beside him. We talked a little more about his holiday. He always came back so much more mature following time spent with his father. He appeared at least two inches taller and looked so grown up in his new jean jacket and gelled brown hair. His smooth baby-skin face was full of vibrancy and his unbroken voice reminded me that despite all his bravado, he was just a boy. While we talked I kept sucking in deep breaths and letting them out in huffs of agitation because I knew what had to be said.

'Is something the matter Mom?'

'Well, yes.' I said looking at him intently. I placed my hand on his knee and continued. 'Do you remember I told you I was having some tests done at the hospital?'

'Yeah, Dad said I shouldn't worry about it because lightening never strikes the same spot twice.'

That didn't make what I had to say any easier. I continued, 'I had the results back a couple of days ago.' I swallowed hard, feeling a huge lump in my throat, and widened my eyes urging him to fill in the gaps.

He looked away and stared at the floor. I let him collect his thoughts in silence and piece together what was coming next. He had recently witnessed my little sister's slow deterioration and endured the pain of losing her through illness, and now he was imagining losing me the same way. He began to shudder as tears streamed down his face.

When he could he said, 'I had a dream while we were in Germany. I could see you suffering behind thick glass but I couldn't break the glass to help you. I was forced to stand and watch you die.'

'Oh honey,' I said as I grabbed him in my arms. We held each other tightly both crying.

'Are you going to die like Aunty Cake did?'

That was the question I was dreading most. What do I say? I couldn't lie and tell him everything was going to be fine. What if it wasn't? What if despite all my reassurances, I ended up suffering and dying like my sister had? I answered by saying that I was going to do whatever it takes to be here for him and his brothers in the future. That we should just look at this period in our lives as a difficult blip that will pass.

'Mom, is there a chance you may die?' he asked again more forcefully.

Reluctantly I said, 'Yes, I suppose there is, but I swear to you sweetheart if I have anything to say about it I'll be fine. I'll do everything in my power to get myself better. Whatever treatment it takes, I'll have it. I promise.'

My shoulder was damp from tears. 'Oh darling, I'm so sorry. Please don't cry.' I held onto him tightly. 'This kind of cancer is much more treatable than the cancer I had when I was a young girl. Statistically I have a higher chance of beating breast cancer than I did Ewings Sarcoma, and I beat that didn't I?'

PJ told me he had a friend at school whose mother was diagnosed for the second time with breast cancer and the outcome looked bleak. I explained that this is the nature of breast cancer – it can come back at any point however long you've been in remission or cured.

'So it's not just a blip then, is it?' he asked in an accusing tone.

I didn't reply and PJ didn't say anything more. After twenty minutes or so I let go of him and wiped his tears with my hands. 'I love you, son. Please don't worry.'

'Do you mind if I go to my room to be alone for a while?'

'Of course not, but remember if you want to talk or ask any questions I'm right here.' As he left, I felt my shoulders slump and my head fall under the weight of my burdens. All my energy was depleted; even the thought of standing felt too daunting so I sat staring across the room. How could this be happening? Oh God, how did I get to this point? I pulled my knees up towards my chest and wrapped my arms around my legs. Fearing

the worst, I heard my body let out an inhuman sound of agony.

I heard a nurse impatiently ask Peter to move out of the way again so she could get to the fridge that held all the drugs. I heard him say very politely, 'sorry.' It made me angry that he was apologising when I was a private patient having to go through treatment in such cramped surroundings.

I opened my eyes and saw poor Peter sitting there on a little stool in our tiny overheated room while I endured what I had to. He sat there for hours but he never once complained. I knew he had work he could have been getting on with, but on treatment days he put aside his own agenda and made it all about me. I can honestly say if it weren't for him sitting by me, supporting and soothing me, I would have ripped out every last tube and chosen to die.

'I've got to make a call to the office darling. Is there anything I can get you?' he asked sweetly.

'The ulcers in my mouth are really hurting. Can you get me some ice to suck on?'

'Sure,' he said kissing me softly on my forehead.

After he left, I sighed heavily. I pulled at the Cold Cap seeking even the slightest relief from the cold. I hated wearing it but knew it would delay any hair loss, so it had to be worth it. I felt agitated at having to be in such a filthy place full of illness, foul smells, and people from all walks of life. Even the outside garden was strangled with weeds and overgrowth. The small pond on the patio was stagnant; a perfect nesting ground for mosquitoes and a great way to spread disease. What made me most angry was that some of us were spending our very last precious moments in such negative and unhappy surroundings. Surely the NHS could do better than this! A huge part of recovery is feeling

positive, but how does one feel positive sitting in a toilet bowl? I used to say to myself that I am as tough as old boots, and that is how I pulled myself through some trying times in life. The truth is, I could not bear the idea of being a victim. The word seems to imply that I have no control, no options left to me, no way out. I did have options: I could put up barriers and keep myself safe and protected within.

I was ashamed of where I had come from, never wanting to acknowledge my past. All the homes my two sisters and I lived in, the terrible situations we found ourselves in because my mother was a drunk, being abandoned for the last time when I was only seven, and being separated from my sisters: these were all memories I wanted to forget. I had been lost without my sisters – hadn't known what to do on my own or how to be Lora Lee without them. I was old enough to have vivid memories of being torn from them, but too young to articulate all the pain and hurt. I didn't even know what I was supposed or allowed to feel. Something in me had shrivelled up and died. I would never be the same again.

Without even realising it, I had disconnected myself from that abandoned little girl and pretended my life before adolescence was just a bad dream. I felt like I was looking down on myself through the wrong end of a pair of binoculars; I looked so small and distant. I wanted to believe I was normal -- needing to fit in and belong somewhere. I wanted to be accepted for who I was now – not who I was then (never connecting in my mind that it was the same person). The once clingy seven-year-old who retreated into her shell was the same clingy adult still hidden away. Becoming invisible, I mastered numbness and became almost unreachable to everybody, including me. If I could fool myself, I would be able to fool others. Just don't look too closely and all will seem normal. I was so lost, depressed, frightened of my own shadow, scared to live and downright stressed out and unhealthy, and I didn't even realise it.

Finding out for the second time in my life I had cancer blew the lid off my pressure cooker. I was only 36 and had many things to figure out, and I needed to do it fast because I might die. I didn't know how to stop the pain from coming and spilling over into everyday life. I kept thinking if the cancer wasn't going to kill me, all the pain would. I knew it was no use. I could no longer shrug off the notion that emotional trauma from my childhood was affecting my physical health. If I was going to survive cancer physically and emotionally, I had to embrace my past.

No longer content to let anybody else speak for me or remain silent in my personal hell, I needed an outlet for all the pain. Never very good at speaking, always too shy and insecure, I turned to writing. Writing became my engine to get me through. Slowly my splintered memories came out and my wounded heart began to heal. I found my voice, and my strengths started coming back to me.

This book is about the slow realisation that life is about the journey – not just surviving or arriving. It is about reconnecting with the wounded child inside, taking an emotional flat line, a desolate cell of a heart, and making it pound loudly again. It is a book about bridging the past with the present, a book about life and loving.